Introduction

In this chapter, we propose a set of alternative solutions to long-term displacement, using shared human concepts and experiences of ‘home’ as our starting point. Based on insights into what people actually do when living with displacement and the strategies they use to go about their lives in long-term exile, we explain how mobilizing the notion of home can change current thinking around long-term refugee and displacement situations and produce policies based on a shared understanding of agency. Our feminist analysis of the refugee policy discourse contends that the current thinking about repatriation, local integration and resettlement (the three ‘durable solutions’ to the global refugee problem) is based on a static, bounded and binary understanding of home, which drives policy. In response, we have developed a nuanced and three-dimensional concept of home in the present policy environment that takes into account home-keeping in displacement, as well as connections with a home-place, to generate more flexible ways of understanding and addressing long-term displacement (see also Brun and Fábos 2015). Beginning with the interconnections between the global and the intimate embraced by feminist geographers, we analyse how refugees and displaced populations make and keep home in interaction and negotiation with the policies formulated to manage their lives. We rely on the critical analysis of home produced by feminist scholars and geographers such as Alison Blunt (2003) and her work with Robyn Dowling (Blunt and Dowling 2006), Iris Marion Young (2005) and Ann Varley (2008). We have also conducted our own feminist analysis of the policy discussions of durable solutions represented by manuals and guidelines, and drawn upon our own long-standing ethnographic research with refugees and internally displaced populations in showing these interconnections. With a feminist geopolitics, we enable an understanding of homemaking that takes place at the meeting point between embodied experiences and geopolitical tactics.

We first analyse current conceptions of home in the refugee policies and contemporary solutions formulated to solve displacement crises. Second, we present a feminist critique of home in the context of displacement to demonstrate how feminist geography enables a more refined understanding of home, which encompasses temporal and spatial dimensions of
homemaking. We then exemplify three dimensions of home (home–Home–HOME) that form a constellation of ideas to show how refugees and internally displaced (IDPs) make home through daily actions, relate to Home from a position of displacement and are enmeshed in a political system built on HOME. Finally, we bring the three dimensions together by proposing that policymakers can mobilize the ways in which displaced populations ‘keep home’ to form alternative solutions to long-term refugee displacement.

Policy conceptions of home and contemporary solutions to displacement

International policies that address population displacement have developed in tandem with last century’s rise of national frameworks of belonging and homeland, often couched in terms of citizenship, in which people are believed to belong to one place, one nation state. The international political and legal structures in place to address displacement and the plight of displaced people are thus built around concepts such as ‘return’, ‘repatriation’ and ‘country of origin’, to put people back into place. These legal terms signal a shared understanding of how the international community deals with the problem of people ‘out of place’ (Malkki 1992). The terms have been presented across several compendia prepared by the key actors involved in supporting refugee repatriation or, if a return to a country of origin proves impossible, local integration in the country that had granted asylum or resettlement in a third country. Despite the acknowledgement of their weaknesses, these are well-recognized and commonly accepted terms, framed as the ‘durable solutions’ to displacement: ‘durable’ because they address a humanitarian need, should not require revisiting and, by implication, represent an end to displacement.

The discourse around the durable solutions may, however, be seen in stark contrast to the circumstances of the contemporary era in which long-term displacement for both refugees and IDPs has become the norm. In 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees stated that in the 32 long-term situations of displacement ‘of concern,’ people had been displaced for an average of 26 years (UNHCR 2015). Prevailing approaches to solving refugee crises – the three ‘durable solutions’ – have largely failed to produce a meaningful end to displaced people’s predicament (Brun and Fábos 2017). Moreover, the current policies for long-term refugee situations contribute to the dominant narrative that displaced people are either ‘stuck’ in limbo and passive, or on the move and threatening. The implied solution to this double bind is for refugees to ‘go home’.

If there is a contemporary discourse that ‘going home’ is the best solution for refugees, the concept of home itself is notably undefined. The first edition of the International Thesaurus of Refugee Terminology, published in 1989, offers terms related to housing, shelter, settlements, relations with host communities and family, in which specific definitions including home birth and home economics can be found, but home itself does not appear as a unique thesaurus class. In 2006, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) formulated a master glossary of terms to guide consistency in policy and practice. The term ‘home’ was not part of that glossary, either. Neither does the second edition of the International Organisation for Migration’s Glossary on Migration, published in 2011, include ‘home’ as an entry, nor does the UNESCO Handbook of Selected Terms and Concepts for People on the Move (2008). Discussing this matter with some of those involved in formulating the glossary, it is clear that home as a term of policy use was never added to the thesaurus; it is too complex and has too many meanings, while simultaneously so commonplace as to seem unnecessary to include. Despite a surge in research on home and forced migration since the early 2000s, the word is still, to a large extent, taken for granted in policy.

The concept’s taken-for-grantedness influences policy in particular ways. An analysis of key humanitarian law and refugee protection instruments, such as the 1951 Geneva Convention,
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shows that the terminology around asylum, protection and return of refugees is clearly laid out, yet ‘home’ remains undefined and the implication of the geographic home-place around which refugees’ flight, loss and displacement centres remains unspecified. The meaning of home that emerges from our analysis is a ‘flat’ home, a home that is synonymous with the nation state: an understanding that does not capture the multiple scales and dimensions of home. Home is related to a location; it is either where someone originated from or where they have become integrated or naturalized. It thus refers to a particular scale: the nation state. Additionally, it is an understanding of home without a temporal dimension, and is a static and bounded notion of home.

Largely missing from the policy discourse is what forced migrants themselves do. People living in long-term displacement must create and re-create home on a daily basis, while developing strategies for the future and maintaining connections to their previous lives. The majority of policy documents are devoid of any acknowledgement of refugee agency, and do not refer to homemaking as a process that takes place at several levels. In a sense, the refugee ‘predicament’ is rather a predicament for the international community to deal with the elephant in the room, namely the inadequacy of the current geopolitical model – where home is relegated to bounded, static and unidimensional nation-state territories for the majority of mobile people. This predicament drives the long-term encampment, warehousing or permanent temporariness of refugees and IDPs (Brun and Fábos 2017).

The analysis presented here challenges the ways in which nation states and the ‘inter-national’ community employ encampment, minimum standards and ‘don’t die survival’ (Cindy Horst, in Hyndman and Giles 2011) to address unending displacement. Essentialist and static notions of home continue to fix forced migrants in both place and time, depriving them of agency and the opportunities to move on and make homes in displacement. A feminist approach to the agentive work of making home helps us to unpack the gendered aspects of control inherent in policies that derive from such a static understanding of home.

Feminist critique of home in the context of displacement

Increased scholarly interest by the social sciences and humanities on home has led to a critical scrutiny of the often taken-for-granted notions that we identified in the previous section. With contributions from feminist research, geography and scholarship on migration, home is established as a more unsettled and problematic entity in which tension and conflict are replete (Brickell 2012; Brun and Fábos 2015). Home is defined as a multiscale and multidimensional concept. It is a site or several sites, and may be understood as both material and immaterial.

Feminist scholarship on home has related to, analysed and criticized home across several orientations, from socialist feminist to post-colonial scholars (Blunt and Dowling 2006). A central feature has been the dismissal of home by some, due to the association with patriarchy and the subordination that women experience in the home (Martin and Mohanty 1986), where a woman’s role is to be the home for the rest of the family (Young 2005). With this particular association of women to home, women became stuck in the home not only physically or geographically but symbolically, too. Women were – and still are – often associated with the home in specific ways: as the maintainers of home, as representing the identity of home as house and nation, and as the nurturers of home. Home symbolized for many women the impossibility of progressing, developing their own life and a future (de Beauvoir 1952/1988). Home came to represent a bounded place without progress. As we have pointed out elsewhere, this way of understanding home ties in closely with experiences of protracted displacement (Brun 2016; Brun and Fábos 2015).
In protracted displacement, the future is uncertain, which leads to an experience of ‘stuckness’ indicated by legal limbo, encampment and other securitization strategies that immobilize refugees over the long term, contributing to a ‘feminization of refugees’ – a depiction of displaced people as helpless, passive and static (Hyndman and Giles 2011). This feminization discourse further associates refugees and their homemaking strategies with stasis and immanence. However, feminist scholars (Ahmed 1999; Young 2005) have made a case for retaining the concept and idea of ‘home’ by emphasizing the actual praxis of home as homemaking.

Not all homemaking is housework (Young 2005). Homemaking is a wider term, which incorporates the ways in which people create place in a mobile world (Koraç 2009). Our work focuses on the role of homemaking practices that are pursued in displacement, which, we argue, takes place through the interconnections between different scales (Brun and Fábos 2015). With the help of feminist geopolitics, we develop a notion of home that challenges the usual scale of inquiry and policymaking by drawing attention to the everyday and embodied sites and discourses through which transnational political relations are forged and contested (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Williams and Massaro 2013). Even the most intimate and everyday aspects of life are key sites where geopolitical power is (re)produced and negotiated (Hyndman 2007; Pain and Staeheli 2014). The multiple meanings of home that are experienced and acted out in long-term displacement are a case in point.

Retaining – but reconsidering – home through a feminist geopolitical lens has expanded the range of understandings of ‘home’ in academic research and in politics. What promises does feminist scholarship make for ‘home’ (Gardey 2016)? The continuing process of creating alternative understandings of home demonstrates that the making of home in/on the margins remains a crucial political act, one that provides a blueprint for revising the gendered disparity between practices of maintaining and practices of constructing. In the context of displacement, home constitutes several locations, made and maintained by mobilizing a diverse set of resources and relations. Like Gardey (2016), we see home as a common space to be built in which the associations between home and identity and between home and our orientations in/towards the world are challenged (Ahmed 2006; hooks 1990; Wilkins 2017). We also find inspiration in Ahmed’s (2017, 7) suggestion that feminism is homework:

By homework, I am not suggesting we all feel at home in feminism in the sense of feeling safe or secure. Some of us might find a home here; some of us might not. Rather, I am suggesting feminism is homework because we have much to work out from not being at home in a world. In other words, homework is work on as well as at our homes. We do housework. Feminist housework does not simply clean and maintain a house. Feminist housework aims to transform the house, to rebuild the master’s residence.

As Ahmed notes, home is not the equivalent of safety and security; because, for displaced people, ‘housework’, ‘homework’ and ‘homemaking’ variously indicate the ways in which home is constantly changing, made and remade according to the everyday lives led in close interaction with geopolitical governance of refugees and other mobile populations, where displaced and non-displaced bodies meet and interact. In this context and by building on the active vocabulary that accompanies ‘home’, we introduce and bring with us into the next section the concept of ‘home-keeping’ – a way to help analyse how people do home in protracted displacement. Our notion of home-keeping refers to the ways in which subjects make home: how home is made, remade and the ways in which different dimensions of home are held together through homemaking practices, housework and homework, and how subjects constantly negotiate the
shifting demands related to the different dimensions of home and navigate their day-to-day requirements at the cross-currents of geopolitical challenges and demands.

Emphasizing these geopolitical acts of maintenance – of home-keeping – alerts us not only to people’s creativity and agency but also to the ways in which the importance of these acts is diminished by policies that take for granted and thereby uphold and sustain temporariness, limbo and other static conditions. In the next section we show how, in situations of protracted displacement, people continue to organize their daily lives and think about their futures, even while their abilities to plan appear to be limited and their home-making practices shaped by hardship and uncertainty.

**Constellations of home: a feminist approach to home and displacement**

Displacement leads to the experience of loss of home, but simultaneously to a redefinition of home. Focusing on home and protracted displacement from a feminist perspective demonstrates that home-keeping for refugees and displaced persons – far from being static and propelled only by the need for survival in the present moment – is a masterful dialogue that spans place and time, incorporating ideal concepts of home and the homeland, aspirations to return ‘home’ and hopes to achieve a more stable exile by strategizing to go somewhere else. We suggest that these multiple concepts exist simultaneously, while the people who hold them move among various locations to form a very complex idea of home that we have called ‘constellations of home’. This metaphor is useful to demonstrate how human beings turn points of reference into meaningful patterns, but that the same points may be imagined differently from each site of observation.

We have derived a simplified triadic constellation that helps us to think about the interconnected and multidimensional implications of homemaking in protracted circumstances of displacement. To distinguish between the various strands that make up this constellation, we visually code them as ‘home’, ‘Home’ and ‘HOME’.

Beginning with ‘home’, we take this to mean the day-to-day practices that help to create the place of displacement as a particularly significant kind of place. Such practices involve both material and imaginative notions of home and may be improvements or even investments in temporary dwellings; they include the daily routines that people undertake in these dwellings; and they incorporate the social connections that people make in a neighbourhood, a section of a camp or other institutions formed to ‘take care of’ refugees and IDPs.

‘Home’, the second modality in our constellations of home, represents values, traditions, memories and subjective feelings of home. Discussions of home and displacement tend to concern an ideal Home; the Home that many displaced people dream of and long for. These ideas are created by the experiences that displaced people have of lost homes, past homes, and their dreams and hopes for future homes. Home articulated during protracted displacement refers to a more generalized ideal in a particular socio-cultural context and influences domestic practices in temporary dwellings. Emerging from the ideal Home are the material standards that a dwelling must have for it to be inhabitable; while some minimum standards may be commonly shared across socio-cultural contexts, certain aspects such as what constitutes privacy may vary widely. The ideal Home for forced migrants in protracted situations is then reflected in the dwelling, but is also expressed at different scales. For example, numerous studies on home and diaspora analyse the ways in which nostalgia and longing for the homeland nurture an ideal, idealized or even invented Home.

Finally, grappling with homemaking in protracted displacement requires engaging with the dominant meaning and institutionalization of home for the current global order. While we
recognize that the notion of homeland is highly politicized for forced migrants idealizing their Home, our focus on the modality coded here as ‘HOME’ refers to the broader social, political, economic and historical context in which it is understood and experienced by displaced people, and also by the perpetrators of nationalist exclusion and violence and the policymakers addressing protracted displacement through the optic of ‘durable solutions’. HOME refers to the geopolitics of nation and homeland that contribute to situations of protracted displacement, the ways in which politics of home are necessarily implicated in the causes of displacement and how displaced populations negotiate these conditions in their day-to-day lives. Including HOME in our constellation makes the rift more visible between assumptions about displaced people in a (largely) fixed global order and the fluid conditions of precariousness and unsettledness.

The constellations of home framework enable an open and dynamic understanding of home, one that incorporates the interaction between the intimate and the global and that captures power relations and gendered dynamics of home-keeping. Our own work suggests that this framework captures what refugees and displaced populations actually do and how they go about their lives in a far more nuanced and realistic way than current policies for protracted displacement can account for. In the final pages of this chapter, we will show examples from our own research how the framework can help to adjust policies to be more attentive to what people do.

In long-term displacement, daily home-keeping practices are a window into people’s fundamental need to control, organize and share their domestic space. For displaced ethnic Georgians in Tbilisi, these routine practices, established under duress and uncertainty, have helped to delineate their communal identity, and they illustrate the key dimension of home that is established through daily living. The war between Georgia and Abkhazia forced nearly 250,000 ethnic Georgians to leave their homes and move to Georgian-controlled areas as internally displaced persons (IDPs). They found places to live in so-called ‘collective centres’, established in old hotels, hospitals and dormitories for students and factory workers – buildings not meant for permanent dwelling. Since the 1990s, these collective centres were temporary homes for displaced Georgians, symbolizing the experience of permanent impermanence. Everyday life was distinguished by waiting and queueing for water, bathrooms or other facilities in these crowded spaces, where two and sometimes three generations shared one room, with shared toilet facilities and cooking in the corridor. But everyday routines were still established. Home-keeping took hold through the labour of daily life: the cooking in the corridor, getting children to school, cleaning and tidying up and organizing a liveable space in these unlovable conditions.

The emotional and physical labour of crafting a home through daily activities constituted homemaking in what was initially not people’s home but gradually became more homely. People made their dwelling spaces beautiful. In particular, one interview stands out, in which two artist brothers described their struggle to generate resources to beautify their surroundings. These daily practices made home – the first dimension of our constellation of home – a particularly significant place, established through housework and maintaining social relations among the displaced in the collective centres. Through these housekeeping practices, people connected the past and the future through the few objects, photos and other items that they may have brought or sourced from Abkhazia. This measure of home-keeping can also engage the production of Home or HOME in a place.
Home

The homemaking practices of the large, displaced population of Arabic-speaking Muslim Sudanese nationals living in Cairo in the 1990s illustrates Home, our second dimension of ‘constellations of home’. While daily practices to set up and maintain homely spaces in large, scattered apartment blocks in this mega-city were taking place, individuals and families spent a great deal of time and resources travelling to visit other Sudanese in their temporary rented accommodations or in places of employment. Since Sudanese did not cluster in a specific quarter of Cairo, conducting visits involved a variety of modes of transport (underground, micro-buses, taxis and on foot), and usually included more than one household in an afternoon of visiting, with some visits as short as 15 minutes before the visitors moved on to the next stop. Notably, visits were made not only to nearby relatives, friends and colleagues, as had been a normal part of Sudanese social life back in Sudan, but rather to a variety of far-flung households in a shifting network of Sudanese nationals with various residence statuses in Egypt. Hosts – whether resident for a number of years or newly arrived – would offer tea, juices and biscuits, along with comforting traditions from Home, such as burning incense and playing Sudanese music cassettes.

Social relations for displaced Sudanese people in Cairo thus centred around a new form of visiting that helped them to articulate their cultural identity and national origin by knitting together individual dwellings across space to produce a Home in exile. Furthermore, while narrating these practices helped displaced Sudanese to remember their ideal Home in Sudan and process their loss and yearning, their visiting practices also comprised acts of re-imagining a future nation that was more inclusive, more equitable and represented the best of Sudanese culture and aspirations.

HOME

In the constellations of home negotiated by long-term displaced people, the HOME dimension comprises the current international framework itself, with accompanying rights to citizenship and temporary protections for people out of place. It should be clear from our two ethnographic examples – the Georgian internally displaced people in Tbilisi and the Sudanese refugees in Cairo – that their temporary status did not prevent the home-keeping practices that helped to sustain families, support their day-to-day lives and provide a sense of home and identity. Nevertheless, the current policy environment of exclusionary legal membership, with its distinct social, political and economic constraints, prevents displaced people from becoming full members of the society to which they have moved. The Georgians and Sudanese created their networked and practical meanings of ‘home’ and ‘Home’ in order to move on, to develop their own sense of security and to deal with the unlikelihood of return and the accompanying permanent temporariness inherent in their status as forced migrants. The HOME dimension, a central condition of all constellations of home, illuminates the tension between the dominant policies governing displacement and people’s struggle for recognition within the current system. While we do not dismiss or romanticize the experiences of marginalization, abuse or violence in displaced people’s home-keeping practices in making ‘home’ and ‘Home’, the cases that we present here demonstrate that home-keeping has created new opportunities, new homes and new practices that have gradually changed families and communities. Grappling with HOME, however, caused heightened vulnerability, a sense of uncertainty and a lack of recognition due to displaced people’s limited rights in societies. The HOME dimension underscores the reality that, for refugees and other displaced populations, unmarked belonging often lies in the past,
when they were full members of a society. Nevertheless, displaced populations negotiate the limitations of HOME on a daily basis, creating new and expanded meanings that constantly erode policy assumptions of people in limbo. In fact, protracted displacement frequently leads displaced people to practise a translocal form of HOME from whence people mobilize resources both within and across particular social groups to challenge the temporality that their physical location (and in consequence their legal and political status) represents.

Conclusion: home-keeping as an alternative to ‘durable solutions’

Currently, displaced people’s struggle for inclusion takes place in tension with the dominant policy understanding that they are away from home, in limbo and in need of re-emplacing via one of the ‘durable solutions’. This discourse restricts the possibility for people to develop all three dimensions of the constellation. While we are not the only scholar/practitioners calling for a more dynamic, fluid and flexible enactment of memberships, recognition and rights of displaced people, our conviction rests upon policymakers recognizing an alternative to the current norms of citizenship by reframing HOME as an interface. Since HOME incorporates settled citizens as well as displaced denizens and since all people, regardless of legal status, are agentive makers of home and Home, we call upon state-based humanitarian actors to realign their discourse with the real progress towards inclusive practices and thinking that is being driven by displaced persons and creative helpers.

Home-keeping is the process through which the different dimensions of home–Home–HOME come together in an articular constellation. Refugee policies and national politics are crucial components that shape a particular constellation and restrict practices and possibilities for home-keeping. Our feminist observation that displacement does not stop people from producing constellations of home also encourages new policies and practices on the part of states, inter-governmental agencies and humanitarian actors, which all contribute to shape the conditions for home-keeping in displacement. Displaced people and refugees mobilize their resources and social relations to enact an expanded notion of home, while feminist scholarship and practice help us to identify how mobilizing home may influence and change policy. First, as we have shown here, policy currently expresses a unidimensional understanding of home. Home has not been problematized as a concept and practice; by focusing on what people do and the centrality of home-keeping as part of displacement practices, home needs to be put on the agenda. Second, by placing home on the agenda by way of understanding people’s practices, it is possible to expand meanings of home, Home and HOME beyond the dominant use, to refer to the nation state as well as to unsettle the taken-for-grantedness of the concept and processes that home-keeping involves. Third, with an expanded notion of home, more focus could potentially be placed on enabling people to make home in exile and thereby be recognized as active participants. Home – reconfigured as the constellations of home – then becomes a political and feminist space and home-keeping a political act that contributes to make place in a mobile world.

Notes

1 We are very grateful to the people living with displacement who have become research participants and interlocutors over the many years that we have been thinking about the concept of home. These individuals are too numerous and live in too many places to name, but we thank them for sharing their intimate experiences with us. We also appreciate the following individuals, who took part in Anita’s seminar at Clark University, Displacement & Development in the Contemporary World: Angela Abdel Sater, Vonia Adams, Sophia Graybill, Donggie Hong, Ray Kane, Siphie Komwa, Alexandra Kramen,
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2 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is a category used to describe people who have been forced to leave their homes in similar circumstances as refugees, but who have not crossed an internationally recognized nation state border. While they are still in the same country as the home-place they left, they may be in an equally vulnerable situation compared to refugees, as the state that is supposed to protect them is unable or unwilling to do so. Similar to refugees, the long-term situations of displacement have become the norm as conflicts are unresolved, and much of the same policy language and principles are shared between agencies working with refugees and the internally displaced. In this entry, we thus consider the two policy categories together.

3 ‘The Thesaurus grew out of the Draft Thesaurus of Refugee Terminology compiled in English for the UNHCR by Piers Campbell in 1986. In 1988, the then chief of the UNHCR Centre for Documentation on Refugees (CDR), Hans Thoolen, invited Jean Aitchison, a respected expert in the field of thesauri, to provide the technical expertise for the revision and restructuring of this draft. She worked closely with the CDR and with an international working group, and the result of their collaboration was the first edition of the International Thesaurus of Refugee Terminology, in three separate language editions, published in 1989’. UNHCR 2006.

4 We are reminded of the select cosmopolitan few who are able to traverse national boundaries with ease, often with access to more than one national affiliation. This is not the case for the majority of people excluded from these transnational pathways as a function of racialized and sexualized bordering.

Key readings


References


